

Remarks at the American Society of Newspaper Editors Convention and a Question-and-Answer Session

April 14, 2005

The President. Thank you all. Please be seated. Thanks, Rich. I appreciate the chance to come back—more than you know. [Laughter] I miss my hometown newspaper. Austin was my hometown newspaper for quite a while. I miss reading it every morning as it was thrown on the Governor's Mansion doorsteps, but not enough to want to stay here for 4 more years. [Laughter]

I appreciate your leadership, Rich. Two thoughts came to mind when I first saw Rich. One, he has to work with a guy named Ken Herman. [Laughter] Is Herman in the pool today?

Ken Herman. Yes, sir, Mr. President.

The President. Yes, okay. [Laughter] Just trying to help you out—[laughter]—kind of like you try to help me out, you know what I mean? [Laughter]

And second, I know Rich is proud of his son, Rich, Jr., who is in Baghdad. My daughter Barbara—one of our daughters went to Yale, and she brought a fellow over the other day. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, I was in your daughter's class. I'm in Baghdad, and I'm working with the State Department to help shepherd the press corps." I said, "Oh, who are some of the characters you've run into there?" And he mentioned a guy named John Burns, who I had known when my dad was the liaison officer in China. And believe it or not, he mentioned Oppel. I said, "I know the old man." [Laughter]

I know you're proud of him. I appreciate the service he's providing.

And I want to thank Karla Garrett Harshaw as well, from Clark County, Ohio. Happens to be one of my favorites. [Laughter]

Just a couple of brief thoughts, and I'd be glad to answer some questions if you have any. [Laughter] Here's what Jefferson

said. Jefferson said, "Our liberty depends on freedom of the press; that cannot be limited without being lost." He also went on to say, "I've given up newspapers, and I find myself much happier." [Laughter]

I haven't given up newspapers. I do find myself much happier than I've been in a long time in Washington. I'm enjoying myself. It's been a fascinating experience to be the President of the country. It's been a remarkable time in Washington. You know, as Rich said, the last time I was here we were talking about the EP-3. It seems like an eternity ago. A lot has happened.

Somebody said, "Well, how do you describe the Presidency?" I said, "It is a decisionmaking job. I make a lot of decisions." At your next editorial board, when you're dealing with a future President, you ought to say, "How do you intend to make decisions? What is the process by which you will make large decisions and small decisions? How do you decide?"

I've got a decision to make today. Do I go with the fastball or a slider? [Laughter]

A couple of thoughts about this year and the agenda, and then questions. First, we've got a problem with energy. And it's a problem that didn't happen overnight. It's a problem that's been brewing for quite a while because the country has yet to implement a strategy that will make us less dependent on foreign sources of energy.

I was at Fort Hood the other day and sitting, having lunch with some soldiers, and the second question that the fellow asked me was, "Why don't you lower gasoline prices?" I said, "I'd like to."

You see, the problem is, the supplies are out of balance with demand when it comes to the major feedstock of gasoline, which is crude oil. We've got to think long term in this country, and Congress needs to pass

the bill that I suggested in 2001 to begin the process of changing how we consume energy in America. We need to be better when it comes to conservation. We need to continue spending money on research and development to find ways to make corn economic—ethanol and biodiesel. We've got to continue exploring ways to make sure we can burn coal in environmentally friendly ways. I know we need to continue to explore for natural gas in our own hemisphere in environmentally friendly ways. But Congress needs to get off the dime. I'm looking forward to working with them.

And so one of the initiatives that I will push—again—is to get an energy bill out. I will tell you, with \$55 oil we don't need incentives to oil and gas companies to explore. There are plenty of incentives. What we need is to put a strategy in place that will help this country over time become less dependent. It's really important. It's an important part of our economic security, and it's an important part of our national security.

I'm also talking about retirement security. I'm talking about it a lot. Frankly, I'm not a really popular fellow on Capitol Hill for talking about it. I recognize that. It's one of these issues that I think people would rather avoid than take on. There's—you've written about this, I'm confident—the old third rail of American politics: If you touch it, you know, you don't do so well politically.

I think Rich would attest to this, that when I was Governor, I felt like it was important to take on big issues, and I tried to convince the legislature to work with me on the school funding issue before it became adjudged by the courts to be unconstitutional or property taxes got so high that it created a real problem. Well, I tried and worked hard. Now, they're dealing with it, I think.

I feel the same way about Social Security. We've got a serious problem. I don't care what your party is or what your political philosophy is; you can't ignore the

math. And the math really is this: Baby boomers like me are ready to retire in 4 years. I'll be 62 in 4 years. That's actually a fairly convenient date for me. [Laughter] And we're living longer. And people ran for office saying, "Vote for me. I promise you more benefits." So you've got a lot of people like me getting ready to retire, living longer, and we've been promised greater benefits than the previous generation. And yet there are fewer people to pay the bill. And so what ends up happening is, is that a pay-as-you-go system goes in the red in a relatively short period of time, and every year it's in the red, it gets worse and worse and worse.

And the fundamental question confronting Congress is, are they willing to take on this issue now, before it's too late—before, by waiting, the cost becomes more and more severe? And so I'm going to spend a lot of time on Social Security. I enjoy it. I enjoy taking on the issue. I guess, it's the mother in me. I appreciate calling people to action. I like doing it. And the more resistance I find for people to protect the status quo, the more determined I am to continue building the case that there is a problem and assuring seniors that they're going to get their check.

And we've just started the process. It may seem like a long time to you, but realistically, we've really just started. If you ask questions about it, I'd be glad to expand on what I mean by that. But there's—I've got a lot more time to tell people there is a problem. See, I think the American people are beginning to realize it, but they've got to understand the significance of the problem. And then seniors have got to realize they're fine when it comes to the check. Because once I make that case, then the issue becomes a generational issue. Grandparents are going to start to ask the question, "What are you going to do about my grandkids?"

Now, in my State of the Union Address, I did lay out options. And I think I have a responsibility to lay out options. I bet

I'm the first President ever to talk about a variety of options that ought to be on the table, that people ought to come forth and discuss. And so I'm looking forward to working with Congress. I'm looking forward to continue to remind people we got a problem. I'm absolutely convinced that, when it's all said and done, inaction will create a political problem for people. The third rail of politics will be failure to solve the problem. And so just to give you a heads up, I'll be coming to your communities, continuing to talk about this issue a lot. I'm going to Cleveland tomorrow to talk about the issue.

Overseas, there's a lot going on. And it's—I believe our actions have helped make the world a more peaceful place. Rich was right; obviously, times changed dramatically on September the 11th, 2001, and we're still at war with terrorists. There are still people there who'd like to create harm to America. The only way to deal with them, in my opinion, is to keep them on the run, is to keep enormous pressure—pressure on their finances, pressure on their safe havens, pressure on their—on people who are willing to accommodate their philosophy. And we're doing that—and not only doing it alone, we're doing it in a lot of other countries. We've got a lot of folks who understand the stakes in dealing with Al Qaida.

We've got a lot of people around the world who are more than willing to share intelligence and to help follow leads and to bring people to justice. Today I was with the Indian Foreign Minister, and we were talking about the neighborhood. And I reminded him that I was appreciative of the efforts of President Musharraf and his efforts in fighting Al Qaida. I thought it was in the best interests of the United States and India that President Musharraf be tough when it comes to running down people in caves that are trying to do harm to free people. After all, India is a free country. It made sense to encourage a leader like President Musharraf.

We're getting help in Saudi Arabia. The terrorists made a tactical mistake, in my judgment, by attacking the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They now understand the stakes, and so we've got an ally in chasing down Al Qaida. And we'll continue to do so. You've just got to know we're going to be relentless and unyielding, and we'll do everything we can to bring people to justice.

The long term to solve the problem, however, of a radical ideology is to defeat it with freedom, is to encourage societies to become open, free, transparent societies based upon rule of law, with respect for minority rights, honoring each human being. Oh, I know, some people say that's not possible in certain societies. I don't believe that. I just don't believe it. I believe everybody longs to be free. I believe deep in everybody's soul is the desire to live in a free world. The people of Afghanistan proved that theory right, as poor people were subjugated to incredible brutality—brutality from the Taliban, and yet when give a chance to vote, millions voted.

The same in Iraq—over 8 million people voted in spite of the fact that they were threatened, cajoled, and some killed as they tried to exercise something that they believe is their right, God-given right to do, which is to express yourself freely in a society.

Lebanon—there's a movement in Lebanon now to be free, to have a democracy that works. And we're working with France and other countries to enable Lebanon's democracy to flourish by insisting that, first and foremost, Syria get completely out of the country. I don't mean halfway out. I don't mean 80 percent out. I mean 100 percent out, not only Syrian military but the secret police and secret service and intelligence officers that are embedded in the Syrian—in the Lebanese Government.

I met with Prime Minister Sharon this weekend. I am hopeful that there will be a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace. I believe in order for that

to work, however, we need to work—the free world needs to work with the Palestinians to develop the institutions necessary for a democracy to survive. And that’s going to take work.

I felt Prime Minister Sharon’s decision to withdraw from the Gaza was bold and necessary. He came to Washington on—I think it was April the 14th last year—and informed me that he was going to do this. And I thought it was a really interesting decision. I admire strong, courageous decisionmaking. It created—his decision created an opportunity now for America, the EU, Russia, the United Nations to work with the Abbas Government to set up a democratic state in the Gaza.

And today I announced that Jim Wolfensohn, the former head of the World Bank, is going to be the director of our operation with Abbas, to help him build a Government, to help them try to pull out of this ash heap of what used to exist, a Government that will function and meet the will of the people. And I think it’s possible. I wouldn’t be expending U.S. capital if I didn’t. And I know it’s necessary if you want to see peace in that part of the world.

So a lot is going on worldwide, based upon the fundamental premise that freedom is a necessary part of achieving a peaceful world. And so I’m looking forward to the next 4 years, working on this agenda, working with friends and allies to continue the spread of freedom, defying the cynics and the critics who believe the free only belong to a certain type of religion or a certain type of person. And my hope, of course, is, when it’s all said and done, to look back and say this world is a more peaceful place after 8 years of my administration.

So, Rich, thanks for having me. Looking forward to taking a few questions. You’ve got the floor.

Richard A. Oppel, Sr. President Bush has graciously agreed to take questions as time allows. ASNE members are invited to come

to the microphones in the audience. Please tell us your name and newspaper. And I’m going to take the opportunity, Mr. President, to ask the first question.

I thought at one time that you had a hard time with the political crowd here in DC, the voters and the entrenched. And I see that—I picked up a baseball cap for this new team you’ve got here, and I see they named it after you; it’s got a big “W” on it. Are you going to the game tonight?

The President. I thought you were going to ask about FOIA. [Laughter]

Mr. Oppel. That’s to come.

The President. Go ahead. Do you want to ask the first question?

Mr. Oppel. No, there will be questions out here.

The President. Okay, I’ll ask them myself, then. [Laughter]

Yes, sir.

Social Security Reform

Q. Mr. President, Clarence Pennington, retired Ohio editor. We remember—I remember you saying that you’re not going to give up all your ideas for a while, until you find out what the opposition is saying about Social Security. When I heard that, I thought it was a good idea. Well, it’s been a while. Is there anybody talking yet, and what are they saying?

The President. Yes. I don’t remember putting it that way. I thought what I said was I welcome all ideas on the table and that if you’re a Democrat or a Republican, please bring your ideas forward, and I’ll do my best to make sure you don’t get ridiculed, punished—whatever word you want to use—for being bold enough to come up and discuss ways to solve the problem.

But it’s interesting, you said we’ve been here for a while. We have been talking about it for a while, but it’s going to take a while more to continue making clear to people in Congress that we’ve got a problem, see. They’re not going to respond until the people say clearly, “There’s a problem,

and what are you going to do to fix it?" And it takes a while because, frankly, this is a heavy lift for some in Congress. You know, why deal with an issue if you don't have to? And so I'm going to spend a lot more time talking about the problem, making it clear to people.

There's a dialog going on quietly up there. People are slowly but surely beginning to share ideas. And we spend a lot of time on Capitol Hill—"we," my staff, in particular—working with Members, trying to listen to their ideas, trying to begin to fashion a long-term, permanent solution to the Social Security issue.

Q. Just between us, what is being said? Any of them saying anything?

The President. Are they saying anything?

Q. Well, yes, about—nobody from the opposition has had a new idea for you?

The President. Oh, they may have, but they're not willing to put it on the table yet, publicly. It's going to take a while. This is a process. I, unfortunately, don't get to write the legislation. I propose; Congress disposes. But yes, we've had some good ideas. Remember, a lot of the interesting ideas that I quoted in the State of the Union were ideas from people like Bill Clinton or Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. These are citizens who have stepped forward and have talked about ways to permanently fix Social Security.

And I keep emphasizing "permanently" because, in 1983, President Reagan and Tip O'Neill came together and said, "Let's fix—put a 75-year fix out there for Social Security," and here we are, 22 years later, worrying about permanently fixing it again. And so now is the time to do it forever.

But I'm pleased with the progress. I'm also understanding that we're—this is just the beginning stages of what is a difficult debate for some. Remember, some in Congress would rather not discuss this issue at all. They would rather say, "Well, please don't jeopardize—put me in jeopardy. Please don't cause me to have to take a tough vote."

And I've just got a different perspective. I think now is the time to fix the problem. The longer you wait, every year you wait, it costs a future generation \$600 billion. And so I'll continue talking about the issue a lot. But it's kind of a—beginning a little movement up there. People are talking. They just haven't made their cards all public yet.

Okay, yes.

Border Security/Immigration Reform

Q. Mr. President, George Condon with Copley News Service. A month ago you stood in Crawford with the leaders of Mexico and Canada and talked about the importance of balancing security but maintaining the free flow of trade and people across the borders. But this month, your Department of Homeland Security has said that they're going to be requiring passports for tourists coming across the border. As somebody who is familiar with the long lines at today's border, do you—what's your reaction to the protests from the business and tourism community? And do you support the requirement of passports?

The President. Yes, I'm aware of the issue, obviously. When I first read that in the newspaper, about the need to have passports, for particularly today's crossings that take place—about a million, for example, in the State of Texas—I said, "What's going on here?" I thought there was a better way to do—to expedite legal flow of traffic and people. Evidently this has been mandated in law. And so I've talked to Condi and the Homeland Security people about making—seeing if there's some flexibility in the law that will allow for, for example, finger imaging to serve as the so-called passport for daily traffic. But you're right, it's going to—if people have to have a passport, it's going to disrupt honest flow of traffic. I think there's some flexibility in the law, and that's what we're checking out right now.

On the larger scale, look, we've got a lot to do to enforce the border. For those

of you in Arizona, now know that Arizona has got more illegal immigrants coming across their border than, I guess, any other State right now. My view is Congress needs to work with us to pass immigration reform. One, we've got to enforce the border better. We've increased border spending by 34 percent since, I think, 2001. But it doesn't make any sense to me to have a system that kind of forces an industry to develop, an industry that smuggles people, an industry that forges documents, an industry that really doesn't represent the best of America.

It seems like to me what we ought to do is be open about it and say, "Look, if you're a willing worker and a willing employee, and you can't find an American, here's a legal way to work. Here's a document which enables you to be here legally so that if you decide to go home for a little bit, you can." And there will be time limit on the document, a time limit on the right to be here to work. To me it's a more humane way than a system which encourages employers who are looking for workers to break the law, to accept—unknowingly accept illegal documentation, for example. And so I—and this is a tough issue. Look, I understand. The danger with the immigration issue is that it can be—it can lead to nativism and encourage behavior which is really not how Americans should view the world.

The long-term solution, by the way, to—for example, immigration issues with Mexico, is for Mexico to grow a middle class. That's why I'm such a big believer in NAFTA. It's in our interest that wealth be spread out through the hemisphere—the best way to spread wealth is through trade—so that Mexico can grow and become a vibrant place, so people are more likely to be able to find a job closer to home. But the reality is if you make 50 cents in the interior of Mexico and \$5 in Texas, you're going to do \$5 if you can make it. And so now is the time for legal—reforming of the immigration system.

I don't believe in blanket amnesty. I think it would be mistake. I think that wouldn't—all that would do is create another incentive for 8 million people, whatever the number is, to come. And so I think if somebody wants to be a citizen, they ought to get in line like everybody else who has gotten in line to become a citizen of the United States. And so my vision is one that's work-related, and hopefully we can get Congress to move on it. There's some bipartisan movement on this issue as well. But I'm under no illusions; this is a tough issue for people, and it's a hard one. But the system is not working right now.

And when you talk about border security, George, it's—it would be better if our Border Patrol agents were chasing down drugs and guns than trying to chase down people. And by that I mean it would be a much more efficient use of taxpayers' money if the system were legal, the worker system was legal so that the Border Patrol could focus on other issues. In other words, if it were legal, people wouldn't have to get in the back of an 18-wheeler. If it were legal to come here and work, you wouldn't have to walk miles across the hot desert. And it would make it easier to protect our border with an immigration system that worked on legalizing work.

Yes, sir.

Government Video News Releases

Q. Thank you, Mr. President, Bryan Monroe from Knight Ridder. We're all aware of the past issues with Armstrong Williams and the video news releases and using Government funds to promote, through media and journalism, positions that you feel you need to get out. Is that consistent with your values and your First Amendment beliefs? And do you think that's deceptive to the American people?

The President. Yes, it's deceptive to the American people if it's not disclosed. And I, first of all, in reviewing this issue, have been told this has gone on for quite a

while. It makes—that doesn't excuse the behavior here, but nevertheless it has been, in that it's a legal—it's legal for—to use these video news clips. But it's incumbent upon people who use them to say, "This news clip was produced by the Federal Government."

Armstrong Williams—it was wrong what happened there in the Education Department. But no, I think there needs to be full disclosure about the sourcing of the video news clip in order to make sure that people don't think their taxpayers' money is being used to—in wrong fashion.

Thank you.

Death Penalty/Theresa Marie Schiavo Case

Q. Mr. President, Wendy Zomparelli of the Roanoke Times in Virginia. In the aftermath of the terribly distressing national debate over the case of Terri Schiavo, you spoke of the need to establish a culture of life, and yet there's one way in which the United States has long been out of step with much of the rest of the world in terms of one's appreciation of life, and that is in the use of the death penalty.

The President. Right.

Q. Can you please talk about a little bit about your view of the death penalty and how that fits into your vision of a culture of life?

The President. Sure. Thanks. I have been supportive of the death penalty both as Governor and President. And the difference between the case of Terri Schiavo and the case of a convicted killer is the difference between guilt and innocence. And I happen to believe that the death penalty, when properly applied, saves lives of others. And so I'm comfortable with my beliefs that there's no contradiction between the two.

Representative Tom DeLay

Q. Mr. President, Bill Sternberg with USA Today.

The President. Oh, hi there. Got a great seat, didn't you? [Laughter]

Q. Yes. Your fellow Republican from Texas, Tom DeLay, has blamed the ethical controversy around him largely on bias by the liberal news media. Do you agree with him on that—

The President. Of course not. [Laughter] No, go ahead. Sorry to interrupt you.

Q. —and do you think Mr. DeLay has become a liability to your party or your agenda?

The President. No, I appreciate that. Look, as I've read his comments today, he wants the Ethics Committee to review his case, and he's willing to step up and talk to the Ethics Committee about it. And secondly, I'm looking forward to working with Tom. He's been a very effective leader. We've gotten a lot done in the Legislature, and I'm convinced we'll get more done in the Legislature. And I'm looking forward to working with him.

Yes, sir.

Freedom of Information Act

Q. Mr. President, Tim Franklin from the Baltimore Sun. I know you'd be disappointed if you didn't get an FOI question—

The President. I thought you were going to ask about the, like the Oriole-National thing, you know—[laughter]—the broadcast agreement or whatever. [Laughter]

Q. In processing FOI requests, should Government officials presume that information should be given to citizens? Or should the burden fall on citizens to convince Government to give them access to information?

The President. That's an interesting way to put the question. Look, the presumption ought to be that citizens ought to know as much as possible about the Government decisionmaking. Rich and I talked about this backstage a little bit, of course. He's constantly lobbying me. [Laughter]

I know there is a tension now between making the decision of that which is—that which can be exposed without jeopardizing the war on terror, and I understand there's

a suspicion that we—we're too security-conscious [conscious].* Let me refer you to the WMD report that the Silberman-Robb Commission—as an example, however, of how I hope that we're becoming balanced between that which the public ought to know and that which, if we were to expose, would jeopardize our capacity to do our job, which is to defend America.

Ninety percent of the report was declassified. I think that might have surprised the press corps. I don't know; I don't want to speak for you all. But I think people following this issue were surprised that so much was declassified. And yet the Silberman-Robb Commission made it really clear that had the other 10 percent been declassified, it would have created—it would have jeopardized our capacity to protect the country. It would have exposed sources and uses.

Rich talked about, you know, I didn't realize we spent that much money on protecting it, but we also spend a lot of money on analyzing FOIA, because somebody told me there's 3.5 million FOIA requests a year, which is a lot. I can't tell you the percentage which pass or not pass, but there is an active interest in people reading documents. And I would hope that those who expose documents are wise about the difference between that which truly would jeopardize national security and that which should be read.

Look, John Cornyn is a good friend, and we look forward to analyzing and working with legislation that will make—it would hope—put a free press' mind at ease that you're not being denied information you shouldn't [should]* see. I will tell you, though, I am worried about things getting in the press that put people's lives at risk. And I know you—I'm sure you feel the same way, and everybody in the room would feel that same way. And it's that judgment about what would put some-

body's life at risk and what doesn't, is where there's tension.

And to answer your question, I believe in open government. I've always believed in open government. Rich is right. You know, I don't e-mail, however. And there's a reason. I don't want you reading my personal stuff. There has got to be a certain sense of privacy. You know, you're entitled to how I make decisions, and you're entitled to ask questions, which I answer. I don't think you're entitled to be able to read my mail between my daughters and me.

And so I've made an easy decision there. I just don't do it, which is sad, really, when you think about it. Everything is investigated in Washington, and that's just the nature of the way here right now. And so we're losing a lot of history, not just with me but with other Presidents as well. And so there's a balance through all this. And I hope it's said—when it's all said and done, that we were fair to the press corps and the American people.

I said it's hard—in my Inaugural Address, I did talk about, we've got to be consistent. I talked to Vladimir Putin about a free press. We've got to make sure our own press is free. I know that. I talked to the people in Iraq about a free press and transparency and openness, and I'm mindful we can't talk one way and do another. But we're still at war, and that's important for people to realize.

Right after September the 11th, I was fully aware that the farther we got away from September the 11th, the more likely it would be that people would forget the stakes. I wish I could report that all is well. It's not. It's just not. It's going to take a while. What is better is that there's fewer Al Qaida, and we got them off balance, and we're continuing to press. And so long as people can be endangered by leaks, we just got to be real careful.

Anyway, I don't know if—I probably talked your—talked you to death. That's call filibustering. [Laughter]

* White House correction.

Thank you.

CIA Employee Identity Disclosure Investigation

Q. Mr. President, Mike Lloyd, the Grand Rapids Press, Grand Rapids, Michigan, kind of a followup on the same topic. When you talk about risks of exposing sources of information that could have an impact on life, do you think that Judith Miller and Matt Cooper are wrong for not disclosing their sources?

The President. Why don't we let the courts decide that. You think I'm going there? You're crazy. [Laughter]

Q. Then I have a followup—

The President. Right answer, Herman? Now, if it were Herman, I would say, lock him up. [Laughter]

I'm not going to talk about that, seriously—

Q. I have a followup that might help you, then. Do you have two tickets to tonight's game? [Laughter]

The President. Yes. Depends on what you write next time. [Laughter]

No, look, this is all—we're all under the microscope on this issue. This is an issue that there is a—Mr. Fitzgerald is looking into all aspects of this issue, and so it's—on the advice of counsel, I'm not talking. [Laughter]

Freedom of Information Act

Q. Good afternoon, Mr. President. I'm Craig Klugman from the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette. I, too, have a follow-up question on FOIA. The longest pending FOIA request is over two decades old. My own newspaper has received answers to FOI requests long after the reporter has left the newspaper. Is there anything your office can or should do to speed up responses to legitimate FOI requests?

The President. First of all, I was happy to hear that the request was more than two decades. I thought he was going to say, like, 4 years and 2 months old. [Laughter] I have no idea how to answer your

question on this particular request. And I will be glad to get Rich to send it over. I really don't. I'm not dodging. I don't know what the request is. I don't know who you made the request to. I don't know why it's taken 20 years.

Q. It's not that particular request; it is just the whole nature that some FOI requests take years and years to get an answer.

The President. Was this a request to the White House or was it to—

Q. It was an FBI request. But I'm talking in general terms: Is there anything your office can or should do?

The President. I think that FOIA requests ought to be dealt with as expeditiously as possible. But again, I just don't know the facts on this one. And I would hope that, at least the FOIA requests to the White House, our staff deals with them quickly or as quickly as humanly possible.

Yes, ma'am.

Q. Hi, Margaret Sullivan with the Buffalo News, Mr. President. Following up just a bit on the question of classified information, which we discussed, would you support a requirement that agencies submit an impact statement, sort of like an environmental impact statement, before they make a determination that large categories of information should be kept secret? Given that the U.S. Information Security Oversight Office, which monitors classification, has expressed concern about the sharp increase in unwarranted classifications of Government information.

The President. Yes. I'll look at the idea. Again, I don't know enough about it. But I think the philosophical answer I gave was that the people deserve to know so long as it doesn't jeopardize their security. Put it in that context. But if there is a—again, this is—is this a part of the Cornyn law, I presume?

Mr. Oppel. The Cornyn law would put a limit of a maximum 20 days on how long an agency has to respond.

The President. I just need to—I, frankly, haven't looked at the particulars of the Cornyn idea. Be glad to look at it. Thanks. Sorry about that.

Decency Standards for Satellite and Cable Television

Q. Mr. President, Scott Anderson with Tribune Interactive in Chicago. There are those in Congress and elsewhere who would propose that the FCC be expanded or legislation be passed that would provide for decency standards on satellite television and cable television. Your thoughts on that, sir?

The President. I didn't quite get it all, the FCC, the Michael Powell suggestion on decency standards?

Q. Yes, there are those who would like to place on satellite and cable some decency standards.

The President. Yes, I'm for that. I think there ought to be a standard. On the other hand, I fully understand that the final edit or the final decision is a parent turning off the TV. I mean, the ultimate responsibility in a consumer-driven economy is for people to say, "I'm not going to watch it," and turn the knob off. That's how best to make decisions and how best to send influences. But I don't mind standards being set out for people to adjudge the content of a show, to help parents make right decisions. Government ought to help parents, not hinder parents in sending good messages to their children.

But look, I mean, we're a free society. The marketplace makes decisions. If you don't like something, don't watch it. And presumably, advertising dollars will wither, and the show will go off the air. But I have no problems with standards being set to help parents make good decisions.

Yes, sir.

*Federal Emergency Management Agency/
Florida Disasters*

Q. Randy Hammer from Pensacola, Florida. The four hurricanes that hit the State

and, since then, the counties that were hardest hit have had problems getting information as well as help from FEMA. At the congressional hearings last month, there was a sense that FEMA was more effective and responsive when it wasn't under the umbrella of Homeland Security. Would you support removing FEMA from under the umbrella of Homeland Security?

The President. No. I would support getting FEMA to do its job no matter what the umbrella it's under. I was, one, impressed by the FEMA response. Of course, sometimes I only get the Cook's tour. But I——

Q. Well, it was pretty good when you showed up. [*Laughter*]

The President. That's what I was afraid of. [*Laughter*]

Q. It was after you left that——

The President. No, I think FEMA ought to be under the umbrella. I just think it ought to do its job as good as possible. Look, if FEMA—I don't think that is—I don't think the umbrella under which FEMA exists will make the decisions as to whether or not people respond to a national catastrophe like that.

I do get feedback from your Governor—[*laughter*—who felt like things were going all right. The Congressmen from that part of the world—the last time I was down there, I asked them if they thought the response was—the initial response was good, and the question is, is the followup response?

Q. Right, it's the followup response.

The President. Yes, the SBA loans, the help. And he didn't complain—or they didn't complain. But I'll check back into it. No, I think FEMA ought to stay in the Homeland Security Department, though.

A couple more, and then I've got to go warm up. [*Laughter*]

Independence of the Judicial Branch

Q. Mr. President, Chris Peck, editor of the Commercial Appeal in Memphis. This

morning we heard Floyd Abrams, a First Amendment attorney, who said that greatest challenge and the greatest threat to the First Amendment now is the effort that Congress is making to put pressure on judges, to try to say that judges should not act independently. And part of this grew out of the Terri Schiavo case, but there are other pressures growing. What is your thought about the role Congress should play in trying to influence the decisions of judges?

The President. I think there are three distinct branches of Government, and they ought to act independently and serve as checks and balances. I'm strongly for an independent judiciary. My focus with Congress on judges is that they're not approving enough of my judges in the United States Senate. And I think my judges ought to get an up-or-down vote, period. I think they ought to get a hearing, and I think they ought to get to the floor of the Senate, and I think they ought to deserve an up-or-down vote. But I'm strongly for an independent judiciary.

China-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. President, Rod Sandeen from the Freedom Forum. You talked that there's a lot going on overseas and mentioned some countries. I'd like to ask you about China. What is our Government's policy toward China?

The President. Well, that is a complex question because the relationship is complex. On trade, we're friends with China, for example, for floating our currency, so we can have free and fair trade with China. With human rights, we expect China to be a society that welcomes all religions. When it comes to foreign policy, we expect China to cooperate in the war on terror, and we expect there to be peace with Taiwan.

I mean, there is a lot to our relationship with China. My view of China is, is that

it's a great nation that's growing like mad. That's one of the reasons why Americans are seeing over \$2 gasoline, is because demand for energy in China is huge, and supply around the world hasn't kept up with the increase in demand. That's why you're seeing crude go up, and crude is the feed stock for gasoline.

But we've got a very complex and a good relationship with China right now, and I intend to keep it that way. But I'm constantly reminding China that a great society is one that welcomes and honors human rights, for example; welcomes the Catholic Church in its midst; doesn't fear religious movements. As a matter of fact, a vibrant society is one that welcomes religious movements. But with China—we've got good relations with China.

Listen, I've got to hop. I want to thank you for your time, appreciate your interests. God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:22 p.m. at the J.W. Marriott Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Richard A. Oppel, Sr., past president, American Society of Newspaper Editors, who introduced the President; Ken Herman, reporter, Austin American-Statesman; Karla Garrett Harshaw, president, American Society of Newspaper Editors; Minister of External Affairs K. Natwar Singh of India; President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan; Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel; President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice; columnist Armstrong Williams; President Vladimir Putin of Russia; Patrick J. Fitzgerald, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois and Department of Justice CIA leak investigation Special Prosecutor; and Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida. He also referred to the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction (Silberman-Robb Commission).

Statement on House of Representatives Passage of Bankruptcy Reform Legislation

April 14, 2005

I commend the House for acting in bipartisan fashion to curb abuses of the bankruptcy system. These commonsense reforms will make the system stronger and better

so that more Americans—especially lower income Americans—have greater access to credit. I look forward to signing the bill into law.

Remarks in a Discussion on Strengthening Social Security in Kirtland, Ohio

April 15, 2005

The President. Thank you all for coming. Please be seated. I appreciate you coming, Steve, thanks. Glad to give you a ride home on Air Force One. [Laughter] I really do like working with Steve. He's a thoughtful fellow who cares about issues, and this is—what we're here to talk about is an important issue, which is Social Security.

Before I do, I want to thank the community college for hosting us. I'm a big believer in community colleges. Community colleges have got the capacity to change curriculum to meet the needs of a local workforce, for example. And one of the real challenges of the 21st century is to make sure people have got the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21st century. And a fabulous place to find those skills is our community colleges.

So thanks for what you do. Thanks for being a host. Thanks for letting us come and have a—what I think you'll find to be a really interesting educational experience about a vital issue confronting the country.

I want to thank Lieutenant Governor Bruce Johnson for joining us today. I appreciate State Treasurer Jennette Bradley for joining us today.

I want to thank the mayor, Ed Podojil, who is here. I appreciate you, Mr. Mayor. And I want to thank Dave Anderson. The last time I saw Dave, I said to Dave, I

said, "Dave, fill the potholes." [Laughter] That's just a piece of advice. [Laughter] And so I saw him in line coming in. He said, "I'm just here to report for duty, Mr. President. I did fill the potholes." [Laughter] You'd get reelected if you want to run again. [Laughter]

Anyway, I want to thank Anita Isom, who's with us. Anita is a young lady I met when we landed there at the airport in Cleveland. She is a volunteer, and she has helped and been awarded because of her reading-related activities that benefit others. The reason I like to mention a soul like Anita is that, no matter what your age, no matter where you live, you can help this country by becoming a volunteer, by helping somebody who hurts, by teaching somebody to read, or feed somebody who's hungry, or put your arm around somebody who needs love.

I like to remind people that the greatest strength of this country is the heart and souls of our fellow citizens and the great compassion of our people. And so if you're interested in serving America, do so by becoming a volunteer in the community in which you live and help change this country one heart and one soul at a time.

So, Anita, thanks for coming. Thanks for meeting me at the airport.

Let me talk about Social Security. I could be talking about a lot of things, peace